CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

Marion Barry 1978 Mayoral Primary Campaign Oral History Project
Interview with Patricia Mathis
Conducted on January 21, 2017 by Betty King

Patricia Mathis is Executive Chair and Founder of XCastLabs, Inc. and a trustee of the Episcopal Divinity School at Union Theological Seminary. She has been a thought leader in the communications space since divestiture. She is a former Assistant Secretary of the Treasury and has been appointed by several Democratic Presidents to lead national task forces. She was appointed by Mayor Barry to several boards and served with great distinction as a Trustee of the University of the District of Columbia.

BK: My name is Betty King, and I'm sitting with Pat, Patricia Mathis, in Miami Beach, Florida. The date is Saturday, January 21st, 2017. When did you first meet Marion Barry, or you became aware of him?

PM: I first became aware of Marion Barry when he was a voting rights activist. I met him basically for the first time on the boardwalk in front of the convention center [in Atlantic City, NJ] with the Mississippi Freedom Party, where he was advocating along with John Lewis [civil rights leader and later Congressman] and others, to have the Mississippi Freedom Party seated [at the Democratic National Convention].

BK: What year?

PM: That was August of 1964.

BK: And you met him actually when?

PM: I physically met him. I can tell a story. [President] John Kennedy, of course, was the presumptive nominee for the second term, and he had designated New Jersey as the convention site to bring money into the convention site, and this was a favor to then-governor [of New Jersey] John Bailey. And after he [Kennedy] was assassinated, of course, the convention itself became very hotly contested, particularly in light of a wave of emotion in the organization to cause Bobby Kennedy [US Attorney General and

brother of President Kennedy] to become the nominee. And, of course, that was [President] Lyndon Johnson's last worst nightmare.

In the meanwhile, as a result of Mississippi Freedom Summers [a volunteer campaign to register voters], it was called, and organized by members of SNCC [Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee] and civil rights activists for voting rights throughout Mississippi, in 1964. A delegation had come from Mississippi to petition the Democratic Party Credentials Committee to seat this segment over the Mississippi delegation. It was a hotly contested opportunity – I mean, challenge, of course, and famous now. But one of the demographics in Atlantic City was that there were no open housing protections at that point in time. And the convention center was probably three miles away from the city center where there weren't even any black hotels. There were segregated housing bills that passed during the Johnson administration.

So whole streets in Atlantic City were well away, and taxis, people got around on little jitneys, bicycles and jitneys, and they didn't move black people around. Although, a few blocks away, there was one of the more famous jazz centers in America, and famous jazz musicians came to a black club, really, but there really wasn't any housing and it wasn't particularly welcoming to black people. So, I actually don't remember exactly how they [the Mississippi Freedom Party protesters] got physically in front of the boardwalk, but I do know that once they got there that they didn't have any place to get food, they didn't have any place to get water, and they didn't have any place to sleep, and they didn't have any place to pee. And it was a fine, a pretty serious fine in Atlantic City, for anyone to go off the boardwalk after dark, just as a security measure, and it was particularly so during the convention.

So, John Sanger, who was a young heir to the Sanger-Harris fortune in Dallas and a longtime friend of mine, a law student, he would come with me during the summer. We'd been there in June and August, really trying to negotiate housing, and I was a very young person myself. But John and I were friendly, really, through Bob Strauss, who was chair of the Democratic Party. And because of that – I mention that because we'd been there so long, we had access to all Atlantic City Police, all the hotel owners, but most important, we had access to all the petty cash.

So, we [John and I] stayed at the fancy Claridge Hotel most of the summer, which, of course, was made famous in the *Empire Boardwalk* [*sic*], Nucky character. And we lived there for the summer, but when the convention started, we lived in the hotel just next door to the convention center, and they had set aside for operations or whatever, and in that suite was a safe that had a lot, a lot of cash. And John and I had been passing that cash around all summer, giving tips to restaurants and hotels, trying to get them to improve their attitude about providing more first-class rooms to the (inaudible 05:50) Democratic National Committee. So, I remember, of course, there was a terrible rain one night, and I think some of the historical Mississippi Freedom Party protesters sitting under plastic, or mainly newspapers, trying to stay warm and dry.

Everybody wore cotton-picker overalls, overalls with shirts underneath. It was blistering hot, very humid. And, of course, the quality-of-life conditions were very unacceptable for these people. Andy Young [civil rights leader, later Congressman, UN Ambassador and Mayor of Atlanta] was there. But at any rate, John Sanger and I, we called it creating liberation. We removed approximately $1,000 in cash from the petty cash, the Democratic National Committee had in the hotel safe, and I bribed the New Jersey –

Atlantic City Police to allow the Mississippi Freedom Riders to go under the boardwalk to sleep and to pee.

And John and I were able, through our vast restaurant network, to secure food and whatever, that we posted underneath there. So, it was under those circumstances that I first met Marion, and my recollection is that I actually first met Ivanhoe Donaldson [manager of Barry's 1978 campaign]. And I don't remember which one of them had said to me, "Ms. Pat, I hope you don't have to go to jail for this." And I remember laughing, "Well, I think everybody is going to jail for this." So, it kind of faded out of my life. Then, of course, I watched Marion's career when he came back to do Pride [youth employment and training program Barry established] and then ran for –

BK: So, when he came to Washington.

PM: When he came to Washington, yes. I don't remember seeing him in any kind of organizational way, but I remember being very excited when he ran for the school board, which you and I both know that Polly Shackleton [DC Council member representing Ward 3], my good friend Polly, was very instrumental in helping him do that. I do remember in my early days, as a kid in Georgetown, how excited we had been for Polly to be the first woman to be on the school board. So, I certainly remember Polly working hard for Marion and then probably being involved in his school board campaign in some way, although I was headed back and forth in New York, and then in 1970, I actually went to Boston. So, during the gap, I was mostly in Boston and I came back in '76 to be assistant secretary of the Treasury in the Carter administration. I do remember at some point that I actually was in Washington on the day that Marion was shot [when the Hanafi

Muslims invaded the District Building], and I came back to visit. I don't remember exactly what the date was.

BK: It was in January of 1977. Because Carter was elected in '76, and it was shortly before the inaugural.

PM: I guess I had come back to be interviewed for my post, because I remember physically being in Washington the day that happened and being gravely concerned. And that date always stayed in my mind. In later years, people asked, "Well, how did Marion Barry get addicted to drugs?" And I'd say, "Well, almost everybody that was hospitalized for pain who got shot become reliant on painkillers. And they said, "Oh, was he shot?" So that's a memory that I have about public awareness about people that's formed without any real information certainly about who he was and what he did.

So, because I knew his work, when he was running in '78, of course I was very, very excited about that. Because I was "hatched" and – I mean prohibited by [the Hatch Act] by virtue of my position in the Treasury from being an active participant in his campaign. I nonetheless made a whole lot of phone calls and a lot of pleas and visited with people and tried to help people understand what an important person he was, and his leadership courage during the 1960s, et cetera. I was more able in the '82 campaign because I had been emancipated from political restraints, so involvement in the campaign. So, in '82, certainly I gave money and would have been more helpful in organizational ways. I frankly can't remember all the details. I will share a memorable story, if I can, about my view of how Marion was exploited by the white business community and exploited by the community in general. And that is the day of his second inauguration, which I believe was on January 2nd, they had a business roundtable and informal inauguration.

BK: January 2nd is the official date always.

PM: Well, that evening –

BK: Now this is ’78, or is this ’82?

PM: This is ’82. The phone rang and, “Ms. Pat, are you awake?” I said, “Yes.” About nine o’clock at night, eight-thirty at night. I said, “Yeah.” Real cold outside. And he says, “Well, can I come in for a minute?” And I said, “Sure.” This is before the day of cell phones, et cetera. I’m not even exactly sure how – I guess he had a phone of some sort in his car or he might have been calling from Henry’s, which was a soul food place down the street –

BK: This is when you lived on U Street?

PM: – uh-huh – that we both liked. So, went over and looked downstairs, and there was a police car, so I came downstairs. And (indiscernible 12:57) and I had been watching TV. We both had on our pajamas, as I recall. I came downstairs, and he came in. We went upstairs. He says, “Can I have a drink?” So, he liked Scotch, so I gave him a drink. So, my presumption – I didn’t ask him why he was there. I presumed either, one, he needed to go to the bathroom, and he didn’t want to go in a public place, or, number two, he was about to go someplace else and he just needed a break to not arrive there or be seen. So, he came in, I went over and made him a Scotch. He took off his coat, unloosed his tie, and sat down on the floor.

So, I said, “Well, what would you like to –” you know. I think he said, “Well, do you have any food?” He asked for something to eat, and so I called Henry. He had already closed. I said, “Marion’s here. Can you bring him some fried chicken or something?” He wanted some fried catfish. He loved catfish. And I think he did bring him some food.

I don't remember all that. But anyway, (inaudible 14:01), so MB sat there and talked about old times for about two or three hours, (inaudible) 14:12) about growing up, what it had been like to be a sharecropper's son, in the fifties. We talked about the whole thing. He ended up leaving about two o'clock in the morning. We did have a good many drinks by that point in time. Now, my painful incorporation of that moment is here is a man who had just been inaugurated, on that day, the mayor of the most powerful city on the planet, and no one had planned a celebration for him.

BK: No.

PM: That's true.

BK: My God. I'm trying to remember January 1982.

PM: You can look at it. Now, he had something the night before the inauguration. But my observation – now, you keep in mind I grew up in Georgetown, where my housemate was Liz Hilton, who was [Publisher of the *Washington* Post] Katharine Graham's executive assistant. And I lived across the street from Ben Bradlee [editor of the *Washington Post*] and next door to Ann and [TV news anchor] David Brinkley, so my keen awareness was the fancy Georgetown dinner parties with the power elite where all these events were happening. I know for a fact there were no power-elite celebrations for MB during his second inauguration. I know that for a fact.

BK: He ran against Patricia Roberts Harris.

PM: Right, right.

BK: So, if she had won, she would have not – all the power elite would have been –

PM: Right.

BK: – celebrating her.

PM: But it wouldn't matter. I mean, the point is –

BK: No, no. I understand.

PM: – no one – and I'm thinking of one business community who I know who exploited him like crazy to do all sorts of – the developers. I won't mention their names, but you know as well as I do that they were trying to ride his horse to business power for – and he was facilitating – he was helping the city grow in extraordinary ways. He had very courageous views about putting the city center there at 17th and U, right by –

BK: 14th and U.

PM: 14th and U, right in the middle of what was the worst urban block since the late 1960s riot. He had more courage –

BK: Since Martin Luther King [Jr.'s assassination].

PM: That's what I'm saying, the 1960 riots. Of course. So, I mean, he had so much courage, and he provided so much of an opportunity to the Washington, DC, white establishment to do business development. And I always felt that they did that on his back. I mean, I just concluded that. I know many people in his campaign considered they were very progressive in supporting this radical black man, and my interpretation of it is quite different.

BK: That's very interesting. That's the saddest story I've ever heard.

PM: Well, and Mary Jo [my partner] was in the room. She knows it's true.

BK: No, I don't doubt you for a single moment. It's just that it makes me very unhappy to think of it. Now, then Marion appointed you to the board of the University of the District of Columbia [UDC}. Is that correct?

PM: That is correct, yeah.

BK: When did that occur?

PM: I think I was first appointed in, I would say, 1985, ’86, or something. I had an academic background, academic administration and academic boards. He had asked me was there a public service that I wanted to. Well, before that he had appointed me to an accreditation board. I forgot what it was called, a board that accredited higher education in the District. And I was a little bit reluctant to do that, but I agreed to do it. [Ms. Mathis felt this section about the accreditation board was confused. She has written a more coherent explanation of her experience on it which is appended to the end of the interview.] And I have to say, his administration was, or the people in that group, they were carryovers, actually not Marion appointees, and they were harassing white college administrators in the district. There’s no question about that. And kind of in a junket kind of way.

They would go to Johns Hopkins (indiscernible 19:02) campuses in Rome or Cairo and insist, they told them not to go there (inaudible 19:11) their programs were appropriate. So, their pattern was to require universities to fund these junkets for the members of this committee. And I never went on one of these trips, which (inaudible 19:31) and really actually created some hostility with some of my fellow board members. I think there were five board members. So, I remember going to Gladys Mack, who was one of, of course, Marion’s aides [director of the Office of the Budget]. I said, “Gladys, this group _”

BK: She was on budget.

PM: Yeah. I said, “This group is totally corrupt.” There was a guy there by the name of Nate Simms. I don’t know if I mentioned his name. He had orchestrated all of these illegal

junkets, and he would always go on them, of course. And they were charging universities maybe $30,000, $40,000 to (indiscernible 20:12) these site visits of Catholic University, American University, Johns Hopkins, Georgetown, George Washington, anywhere they had an international program. So, I told Gladys, "Look, this is not a good thing. It doesn't reflect well on Marion's administration to be allowing this to happen." These were holdovers pre-Marion.

So, Gladys and I, I'll just say we had a lot of fun trying to figure out how to put an end to this finally, and so we were able to do that. Neither Gladys nor I were looked upon with (inaudible 20:50) amusement for our extinction of this wonderful junket, but we weren't able to do that. We used to laugh about that. And then after that term, then I agreed to serve on the UDC board, and I went there, really, with the thought that I could maybe help create a permanent endowment. And that's general counsel, Marion's – Reid. Marion's general counsel.

BK: Oh, Herb Reid.

PM: Herb Reid, of course. Herb Reid was general counsel.

BK: Oh, yeah. Great man.

PM: He'd been a huge fan of Marion's always through the years, and I think Herb had actually been one of the junior clerks on [Supreme Court case on school desegregation] *Brown v. Board of Education*. A very brilliant man, one of the first African Americans to graduate from Harvard Law School. So, Herb and I were great pals. Then we brought Roger Wilkins [civil rights leader, professor of history, and journalist. I tried to recruit two or three people who might have the wherewithal and some power to help build an endowment for UDC. I had been – interestingly, coincidentally – actually involved in the

merger of the schools because I was an aide in the Johnson White House when they put those three colleges together, the technical. It was a small teachers' college at the junior level.

BK: The Miner Teachers College?

PM: Right, Miner Teachers College and a two-year technology school, and I've forgotten what the third component was.

Mary Jo: Law school?

PM: No, no, no.

MJ: They didn't have law school?

PM: No, that wasn't part of the Johnson thing, no.

BK: Law school came much later.

PM: Much later. But at any rate, those three colleges were put together in 1988 by a Lyndon Johnson initiative. And Roger Wilkins had worked on that. He was in the White House, too, as (inaudible 23:18). So, we tried to do that, and it was a very (indiscernible 23:26) time, because the Reaganauts were still in power and really struggling every day with (inaudible 23:41) and Home Rule in general. And the Congress was trying to stop every move from getting seen to get funding, and, strangely enough, some of the alumni of Howard were also opposed to UDC, thinking somehow or another it would have drove away from Howard's distinctive private university place and its distinction as a historically black college.

BK: If you had to sum up the impact that Marion had on the District of Columbia during his lifetime there, and particularly during his four terms as mayor, the good, the bad, and the middling –

PM: Well, I think that his greatest positive legacy was his enormous community-organizing skill and his ability to energize people to care about their government. I mean, certainly, it was a tradition that people like [President] Barack Obama followed. But for Marion, I think one of the ways he's so misunderstood, he had a keen advanced intelligence. He had an orderly, thoughtful, planful mind. He recruited great people that he surrounded himself with to execute these visionary programs, who were also thoughtful and organized. But he also had an unbelievable intuitive emotional IQ in that he really knew where people were coming from, and he could relate to everybody. And I love when he used to go over to the old folks' home and play dominos with Lozzie York all night and be as comfortable socially and empathically with poor black women in the projects as he might be to engage with somebody like me, with my privilege and education. But I truly think he had really an incredible kind of humanity, and I loved him and I'm very, very proud to have been associated with him.

BK: Great. Well, thank you very much for participating in our project and supporting it as you have done. Appreciate it very much.

PM: I'm proud to be one of them.

BK: Thank you.

PM: Was that good? Was that okay?

BK: Perfect. Great. Just great. I mean, it's very interesting.

[End of interview]

NOTE (clarification of accreditation board narrative beginning on page 9):

Right after I was appointed to this 5-member Board, I noticed something troubling. The Commission was requiring all the private universities in the District—brand names like John Hopkins, American University, George Washington, Georgetown—who had international campuses to submit to an accreditation audit at the international site every 3 years. This process would require 2 members of the Commissions—along with the Commission staff-- to fly to these sites for a week of evaluation—with all the costs borne by the university. We are talking $25-$50K per person.

No one on the Commission—and certainly not the staff-- was actually competent to evaluate the specialized international programs of these distinguished universities. In sum, these were junkets which the universities were required to fund. I objected to this practice—which immediately set me at odds with the staff who got their annual holidays around the world funded in this way. (The other Commissions also applauded these perks.)

I went to Glady Mack and told her about this and that in my view this organization was a bureaucracy with a primary mission of intimidating historical universities to make sure the staff got free travel to Egypt, Rome, Jordan, Switzerland, etc. at the expense of these predominately white institutions. Glady and I developed a strategy to phase out the offending staff and re-energize the accreditation process. I mentioned this example to confront a misunderstanding so many people had/have: that MB packed his government with cronies. This parable illustrates the commitment Marion had to bring on highly professional people to improve professionalism and efficiency within his administration.